

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Previously Published Works

Title

The gateway to the pacific: Japanese Americans and the remaking of San Francisco

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2421t7md>

Journal

Planning Perspectives, 35(2)

ISSN

0266-5433

Author

Asaka, Megan

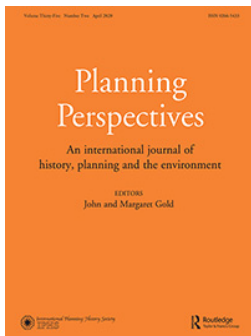
Publication Date

2020-03-03

DOI

10.1080/02665433.2020.1728054

Peer reviewed



The gateway to the pacific: Japanese Americans and the remaking of San Francisco

by Meredith Oda, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2019, 304 pp., US\$35 (paperback)

Megan Asaka

To cite this article: Megan Asaka (2020) The gateway to the pacific: Japanese Americans and the remaking of San Francisco, Planning Perspectives, 35:2, 398-399, DOI: [10.1080/02665433.2020.1728054](https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2020.1728054)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2020.1728054>



Published online: 19 Feb 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Andrew W. Kahrl
University of Virginia
✉ awk6n@virginia.edu

© 2020 Andrew W. Kahrl
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2020.1728056>



The gateway to the pacific: Japanese Americans and the remaking of San Francisco, by Meredith Oda, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2019, 304 pp., US\$35 (paperback)

The Gateway to the Pacific opens with the story of Tomoye and Henri Takahashi, a Japanese American couple in San Francisco who managed to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of World War II through a successful business selling Japanese housewares to local consumers around the city. In 1962, their hard-earned livelihood was cut short as the City of San Francisco targeted the historic Japanesetown for redevelopment, forcing them to close up shop and relocate¹. In a different kind of study on postwar planning history, the Takahashis would serve as an example of the devastating impact of urban renewal programmes on marginalized communities across the U.S. But Oda adds an additional twist. The Takahashis were displaced by the construction of the Japanese Cultural and Trade Center, a Japanese-themed commercial development that showcased San Francisco's connections to Japan. The very transpacific dynamics that opened up opportunities for the Takahashis also laid the groundwork for their eventual dislocation.

The contradictory position of Japanese Americans in the postwar urban landscape forms the basis of Meredith Oda's excellent new study. Oda situates San Francisco's postwar history within the context of U.S.-Japan relations and the growing interest of everyday Americans in all things Japanese. She highlights the importance of Japan to San Francisco's civic identity during this period, arguing that the pursuit of Japanese business and capital drove local decisions around urban planning, design, and land use. She focuses on the origins and development of one particular place – the Japanese Cultural and Trade Center – to unpack larger questions about the interplay between the global and the local and about how U.S. foreign policy interests in Asia shaped everyday life on the ground in one American city.

This expansive framework, which Oda calls 'transpacific urbanity', places Japanese Americans front and centre in San Francisco's postwar history. The fields of urban and planning history have paid little attention to Japanese Americans and Asian Americans more broadly, despite their being one of the most urbanized groups in the U.S. When Asian Americans do appear in the scholarship, they often do so through the lens of the ethnic enclave, which reinforces notions of their insularity and isolation from the rest of the city. By broadening her focus beyond the U.S., however, Oda is able to highlight Japanese Americans as key actors. San Francisco's cultivation of a transpacific economy created opportunities for Japanese Americans to assert themselves in civic affairs, whether through the sister-city programme that Oda discusses in her second chapter, or during the planning phases of the Japanese Cultural and Trade Center, which comprise the book's middle section.

While Oda is clear that this newfound visibility did not always translate into political gains, still it placed Japanese Americans in a privileged position compared with the city's African American community. Oda spends the final part of the book analyzing the impact of the city's redevelopment projects on African Americans, arguing that, although the two groups shared many commonalities and often worked together to fight displacement, 'the context and values of the city's transpacific urbanity carved a sharp distinction ... for the two long-standing Western Addition enclaves' (p. 13).


Most compelling are Oda's discussions of how Japanese Americans negotiated their newfound role as cultural brokers. Oda pays particular attention to a group of Japanese American 'merchant-planners', longtime San Francisco business operators who took an active role in the redevelopment of Japantown. They proposed the original idea for the Japanese Cultural and Trade Center as a way of maintaining a stake in their historic district yet found themselves cast aside in favour of a wealthy Japanese-Hawaiian developer with close ties to Japanese retail chains that were eager to expand to U.S. markets. Oda also introduces Japanese American flight attendants and restaurateurs who attained professional success as representatives of an 'authentic' Japanese culture, though many had never even visited Japan. Here, we see how the participation of Japanese Americans in this transpacific urbanity was bound up in perceptions of their foreignness.

Readers expecting a comprehensive view of Japanese Americans in postwar San Francisco will likely be disappointed. The study is not a social history of Japanese American life after the war. Though Oda does attend to the complex class dynamics within the Japanese American community and the lingering financial hardships of the World War II incarceration, her goal is not to chart a community history. Rather, she charts the more ambitious project of showing how Japanese Americans 'reshaped U.S. urbanism' (p. 9).

The Gateway to the Pacific significantly adds to the scholarship on postwar urban and planning history. Oda successfully demonstrates the importance of global perspectives to our understanding of U.S. cities during this period. A thoughtful and compelling study, *The Gateway to the Pacific* serves as a model for urban and planning historians, showing the generative possibilities of working at multiple scales and integrating broader transpacific dynamics with the contours of everyday life.

Note

1. This district was known historically as Japantown or *Nihonjinmachi*. It was only after the redevelopment projects of the 1960s that the district acquired the name Japantown or *Nihonmachi*.

Megan Asaka
University of California, Riverside
 megan.asaka@ucr.edu

© 2020 Megan Asaka
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2020.1728054>

